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Pillows, stretches tied to less misshapen kids' heads

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By [Katti Gray](#)

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Parents who used stretching exercises and special sleeping pillows saw improvements in head deformities often created when infants lay in the same spot for a long time, according to a new study.

Those two alternatives are less expensive than special helmets that cost \$2,000 or more and that are only typically covered by insurance in some countries, according to a team of German researchers conducting the study.

"These are probably easier options for some parents," study co-author Dr. Jan-Falco Wilbrand, of the University of Giessen, told Reuters Health. "The helmet has to be worn 24 hours a day and is expensive. Physiotherapy is something you can do at home and easily ... and the pillow is about \$25."

Infant head deformities include severe flattening of the back of the head and one side of the face, and heads that are too short.

"And sometimes we see heads that are much, much wider than they are long," said Wilbrand, whose team's work is published in the *Journal of Pediatrics*. "Can you imagine how strange that looks and how hard that would be for a child?"

The number of deformities increased from 5 percent during the 1990s to between 20 percent and 30 percent in 2008, according to two recent studies. That increase, researchers believe, was partly triggered by efforts starting in the mid-1990s to curb Sudden Infant Death Syndrome by placing sleeping babies on their backs.

Apart from potentially damaging the self-esteem of children, uncorrected head deformities can also affect dental health and delay development of the brain, the study said. Most head deformities do not cause serious long-term physical harm or brain damage, though a small, extremely rare set of deformities can.

The German team followed 50 babies five months old and younger with moderate to severe head deformities that posed none of those serious physical or neurological risks. Among the 43 babies the researchers could examine after six weeks, about 18 percent of the stretched babies and 19 percent of the babies using pillows saw improvements in their deformities.

While "laudable," the study did not include a group of infants that had neither pillows nor the stretching exercises, so it's difficult to say exactly how effective the strategies are, said Dr. Michael Cunningham, who treats head deformities at Seattle Children's Hospital.

Between five and seven months old, "you often begin to see spontaneous improvement" in the head shapes of babies, all of whom are born with soft, malleable skulls, Cunningham told Reuters Health.

After that, healthy babies become more mobile, raising and lowering their heads more frequently. They're less apt to be in the same position for the extended amounts of time, Cunningham said.

As soon as they awaken, babies should be taken off their backs, he said.

Curbing the risks of positional head deformities is pretty simple, Cunningham added: "If you see my eyes, roll me over."

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